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ABSTRACT

Once speech educators turn their attention to the "ideational" function of oral language--that portion pertaining to thinking--rather than the relational function, they will see that speech can and should be incorporated into every discipline. The psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky envisions the ways in which humans use speech to reorder their thinking as a series of stages in which emotional and communicative functions of speech are expanded by the addition of the planning function. Aside from the need for a variety of speaking experiences to enhance language and thought development, group discussion enhances what Vygotsky calls the "zone of proximal development," or the innate capacity that each individual possesses at any one time. Thus, enhancing language experience becomes the best way of teaching even the higher levels of thinking. According to Piaget's theories, adolescence may be the best time for such oral communication in the classroom. At around the age of 14, students begin the transition from ego-centrism to socio-centrism, a condition necessary for higher abstract thought. (HTH)

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Using Oral Communication in the Regular Curriculum

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The title of my presentation may be misleading because my main concern is not so much for the hows of oral communication, but the whys. Why, indeed, add another burden into a curriculum already crowded with requirements, programs of study, and that all pervasive Back-to-Basics? "I don't see where speech applies in my class," says the math teacher. "My schedule is already full," complains the English teacher. No time equates with no talk. Yet, we are increasingly told by education specialists that oral communication belongs in every class from Auto Body to Advanced Physics, and we as communication specialists are sure that it is true. The list is long to justify speech across the curriculum; the list is also long about why there is not time to accommodate speech on a sustained basis in the regular secondary curriculum. However, fascinating new research is providing the justification for oral communication in every class as the links are found between language and learning, and the vital function that speech plays in the formulation of thought. If we as speech educators were to turn our attention to the ideational function of oral language -- that portion pertaining to thinking -- rather than the relational one, we would soon see that every discipline should be incorporating the oral facet of language into its methodology.

Once the why is solved, I believe the how will follow with relative ease.

Studying the value of speech in relation to thinking involves two intellectual phenomena: speaking and thinking. Neither is perfectly understood. Both involve complex processes. And the link between the two, while apparent, has not been fully determined. For example, when we start to concentrate on how we are thinking, the subject matter disappears, and we find we can attend to the process only, frustrating the original intent. Our minds have been called Black Boxes for very good reasons. The only way, at present, we can understand the thinking process is to observe overt behaviors, including speech. Speech, then, becomes the mirror of the mind, and, more importantly, an instrument through which we develop thought patterns. Learning to speak effectively, then, becomes a means to think effectively.

The psychologist L. S. Vygotsky learned of this relationship in his studies of young children. In his book Mind in Society, Vygotsky observes that "every function in the child's cultural development appears twice; first on the social level, and later on the individual level." In other words, first the child verbalizes on a social level, then the speech becomes internalized. Again, this happens in two stages, first aloud, and later silently. These are the beginnings of thought. Language is first used in an interpersonal context, then on an intrapersonal level. The young child holds a ball out to his mother and verbalizes, "Ball." Later he picks up the ball and says aloud to himself, "Ball." This is intrapersonal speech. Later still he converts this word to inner speech and what we call thought. Intrapersonal speech

thus becomes inner speech or thinking process since most advanced thinking occurs with language or formalized symbolization.

Although Vygotsky's studies were of young children, similar studies of school age children have shown the same type of transferral from interpersonal speech to inner speech. While more research in the classroom is needed, it becomes clear that the process continues through adolescence and probably throughout life. If you consider a time when you were learning a new skill, you may have outlined the steps first aloud: put gear in parking, insert ignition key, etc., until the process became a rapid formulation of inner speech. This simplistic example demonstrates one relationship between speech and thought. That is not the limits of the benefits, however. Group discussion allows a variety of ways to approach problems which later become internalized. Formal speech increases vocabulary and syntax strategies. Technical and foreign language enlarge the opportunities to define, codify, and sort environmental stimuli. In every class, oral language experimentation and practice enhance the opportunities to expand inner speech. Of course, writing and reading also are valuable in language development, but the unique value of speech is that by the vocalization the learning is more complete. In addition, the feedback from others helps to refine, correct, and restructure thought patterns.

How we use speech to reorder our thinking can be seen as a series of stages. Vygotsky envisions this process of verbal, intellectual activity as a series of stages in which emotional and communicative functions of speech are expanded by the addition of the planning function.

This expansion could be likened to a spiral of ever widening circles consisting of problems which demand speech and language on an interpersonal level, followed by interior speech and thought that refine and reorder the stimuli, until the person is faced with a new challenge and the spiral recurs. We can understand this better if we think of a man suddenly widowed. Faced with this trauma, he talks to friends, relatives, his minister, others who have had similar problems. As he talks to these people, he is moving his undefined emotions into a codified pattern, labeled, named, which allows him to order his world again and permits him to face his next challenge.

Aside from the need to have a variety of speaking experiences to enhance language and thought development, group discussion, itself, performs a unique function. It enhances what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky describes this as the innate capacity to learn which each individual possesses at any given time. There are outer limits on both sides where the learner is actually functioning; therefore, working alone at his or her desk, the student is limited to that stage at which he or she is most comfortable. Placed in a group of learners, however, his range of capability expands to the scope of the other learners. Interaction with his or her peers will stimulate the student to perform at higher levels than he or she would alone. These findings challenge many extant educational practices that require a child to work in isolation with programmed materials, machines, and, yes, computers. The child who is working singly is losing the opportunity to expand his or her communication skills and the refinement of inner speech. Students need a collaborative process for the most successful learning to take place.

Enhancing language experience, thus, becomes the best way of teaching even the higher levels of thinking. Although some advocate teaching thinking skills directly, this approach has only limited success. Two reasons for this can be suggested. The first is that we never simply think. We think about something. John McPeck in his book Critical Thinking and Education, makes this point when he says that to perform thinking tasks unrelated to subject matter has no transferrable value. He criticizes the quick fix technique of developing cognitive operations such as Edward deBono's lateral thinking methods. Critical thinking involves hypothesizing, projecting, analyzing, and synthesizing which must be done with a knowledge of facts. Astute thinking also demands active minds which probe, question, and are skeptical of the expert voices. This, deplorably, does not often happen in subject oriented courses. What occurs now in 75% to 90% of our classrooms, as determined through observations of schools in the United States, Australia, and England, the teacher rules as an authority figure. It is the teacher who asks questions. The students' role is one of passivity, answering the teacher-directed questions, or reporting previously gained classroom information back again. Hardly an atmosphere to generate persons who can doubt apparent truth or formulate new conclusions. To do that, the students must become the questioners, the teacher must become the designer of the environment that allows this to flourish. We cannot separate the learner from the subject, or we will have a vacuum. The teacher, knowing the subject best, is the one who can best design a climate of challenge and discovery.

The second reason thinking skills cannot be taught in isolation is that true learning cannot occur without its being linked to the person's experience base. Speech, again, can broaden the vicarious knowledge of the learners through sharing information, reactions, and viewpoints. I will not be able to understand a physics lecture, for instance, until I have some fundamental background. I will not understand the intricasies of raising a child without sharing a great deal of information with others.

Finally, if we subscribe to Piaget's theories, we learn that adolescence may be the optimum time to exploit oral communication in the classroom. The reason for this is that higher abstract thought cannot take place until the child has moved from ego-centrism to socio-centrism. This learning stage, as all others, cannot be forced, it can, however, be fostered. Around the age of fourteen this transition begins to evolve. Enabling students to listen, relate, and verbalize experiences with others will assist them to move from the self focal point of view. Classroom activities such as discussion, role playing, drama, and simulations would all enhance this vital step toward more objectivity. Related experiences in a variety of subject areas are needed to help the student in making that important leap.

If language and thought are linked, if speech is a major source to develop both, then every educator has a mandate to utilize oral communication as effectively as possible. Lunchroom

and schoolbus conversation is not the solution. I have answered the math teacher's complaint that there is no application in his or her course, but what about the English teacher's concern about lack of time. Learning is an integrated process. Every lesson probably has an oral component, if we look carefully. Students are already speaking in our classrooms. Partners discuss an experiment in Chemistry. Groups discuss writing in English. Cosmetology students describe a hair coloring method to the instructor.

Speech is a process not just a product. It will help us to do what we already do well. It will also enable us to accomplish our goals more successfully. Once we are aware of why talking is going to assist us in doing a better job, we can devise methods of implementation: open questioning, final draft as well as expressive speech. We can create a climate that encourages our learners to talk effectively, and to dispel once and for all that the quiet classroom is the best one.

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